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FM AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0781
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5646
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 3318
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1468
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1446
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2453
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 4109
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5151
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2753
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 3281
RUEHBAD/AMCONSUL PERTH 1296
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 3119
RHHJJPI/USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JAKARTA 002148

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC-ORIENTED PARTY'S ATTEMPT TO WOO VOTERS
BACKFIRES

REF: JAKARTA 2020 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Pol/C Joseph L. Novak, reasons 1.4(b+d).

¶1. (U) This message was coordinated with Consulate General Surabaya.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: One of Indonesia's most important parties has tried out an unusual campaign tactic. The Prosperous Justice Party--an Islamic-oriented party which goes by the acronym "PKS"--recently rolled out a lavish new ad campaign which portrays former president Suharto as a hero. The reaction to the ad was negative, with critics lambasting the effort to glorify Suharto's authoritarian and corrupt regime. The public relations blunder reflects the pitfalls of PKS's effort to broaden its base of support ahead of the 2009 elections. END SUMMARY.

A SURPRISING TACTIC

¶3. (SBU) The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), one of Indonesia's fastest-growing Islamic-oriented parties, has engaged in a surprising and widely criticized campaign tactic. PKS launched a lavish new television ad campaign last week in honor of National Heroes Day on November 10 which portrays former president Suharto, among others, as a hero. PKS also hosted a campaign event the next day for living children and grandchildren of the "heroes." Suharto's daughter, Titiek, who was notorious for having used her father's position to pillage the public coffers, was one of those honored.

LOTS OF CRITICISM

¶4. (C) The ad did not go down well, to put it mildly. The mention of Suharto as a "national hero" was seen as being a very serious mistake in a country where few pay lip service to the Suharto "New Order." Observers noted that the Suharto regime stands out for its authoritarian tendencies and the

corrupt behavior of the president's family and cronies. The ad, in turn, conflicted with the PKS's image of being a "clean" party, strongly in favor of anti-corruption efforts. Angered about the reference to Suharto, Usman Hamid--a close Mission contact--refused an award offered by PKS re his human rights efforts.

¶15. (C) One well-known legislator told us that the ad was "a disaster." Djoko Susilo, a Member of Parliament for a small Islamic-oriented party and a human rights advocate, told Pol/C on November 18 that "I can't understand why the PKS would try this. They say they are pro-Muslim, but Muslims were persecuted during the Suharto years. They also say they are anti-corruption, but the Suharto regime was totally corrupt." Susilo went on to assert that PKS had badly miscalculated politically -- "Many of my constituents told me that the ad was confusing to them. PKS really should get a new campaign team--no one in Indonesia admires Suharto." Echoing Susilo, other commentators noted that PKS--in choosing Suharto as a symbol when he was hardly a paragon of reform and clean government--only raised questions about its own sincerity and the credibility of its platform.

TRYING TO BROADEN ITS BASE

¶16. (SBU) Facing the flak, PKS defended itself. A PKS party leader told the press that the ad was meant to convey a message of "national reconciliation." PKS officials went on to note (correctly) that other national figures were also mentioned in the ad, including former president Sukarno, the leaders of the large Muslim groups Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, a former military commander, and a freedom fighter from the Indonesian war with the Dutch.

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¶17. (C) That said, PKS's ad was a blunder which reflects the pitfalls of the Islamic-oriented party's effort to broaden its support ahead of the 2009 elections. PKS, trying to move beyond its narrow Muslim voter base, has distanced itself from a purely Islamic image and is trying for a more pragmatic and moderate image. PKS leaders have explicitly rejected the idea of an Islamic state, for example. PKS also had stunning successes in gubernatorial races in West Java and North Sumatra based on platforms which veered away from a conservative agenda.

¶18. (C) PKS has reason to be worried about its image with the voters. Of the four major Islamic-oriented parties, PKS was the "it" Islamic party which gained the most seats between the 1999 and 2004 elections, going from only seven seats to 45 (ref A). However, it may not be able to reproduce that stunning success in 2009. A November poll now shows PKS ranked 4th in popularity in terms of all parties, which is not a bad showing. However, PKS is ranked at 4.9 percent, a significant drop from previous polls. Secular, non-Islamic parties have gained the support that PKS has lost.

¶19. (C) In launching its recent ad campaign, PKS was trying to distinguish itself, desperately reaching out to swing voters--many of them moderates on the secular-Mulsim divide--who comprise 33 to 45 percent of the Indonesian electorate. In choosing to commemorate Suharto, the party made a mistake. In the lead up to the April 2009 legislative and July 2009 presidential elections PKS can't afford many more such errors if it wants to leave a significant mark.

HUME